

ILYA ZHIVOVY AND THE "SYMPHONY OF LIFE"



Bakhtiyar Bakhtiyarov: Having seen your dossier, I immediately understood that you are a very ambitious person. Is this true?

Ilya Zhivovy: Indeed, I am.

Bakhtiyar: At the start of your creative career, you immediately declared: "I don't want to be Petipa, I don't want to be Balanchine, I want to be Ilya Zhivovy with my own aesthetics."

As I see it, you really managed to combine classics and expressiveness. And all this multiplied by a great background: 9 years of study at the Academy of Russian Ballet and 14 years of creative expression at the Mariinsky Theatre - a huge base upon which you started to grow very quickly. You are only 33, but you already achieved world fame. You have visited the most famous stages, and now you work with us at Cleveland Ballet.

I would like to ask: how have the years impacted your view of the world and choreography, and your own method - neoclassicism?

Ilya: I started, let's say, on the other end of the spectrum. I reviewed and danced a lot, both solo and corps de ballet. I went through all the stages, starting with the back of the corps de ballet on stage, and did my best to study all directions and styles. I staged my first performance after five years at the Mariinsky Theatre. My first thought as a choreographer were rebellious: I said to myself - I will not do it like them, I want to have my own way. This sounded quite radical at the time, it was the decision of an aspiring choreographer. Nonetheless, I understood in the end: Yes for the author's styles! But visual experience is a must.

Bakhtiyar: Good term "visual experience" ...Pablo Picasso's phrase: "A capable artist borrows, a great artist steals," comes to mind. A poor artist simply takes and redraws someone else's work under his own name...A great one appropriates the very idea, takes hints from nature, from people. Then he rethinks and reworks in his own way. Bach would say something like this in the morning after breakfast: an octave has seven notes, all combinations have already been invented. Then he would put the score of a popular play by another composer on the harpischord's stand and turn it into an immortal prelude and fugue.

Ilya: Yes, everything has already been thought of, and the right position is to rise above all of this. I, too, look and transform it internally. This is where we arrive at understanding the author's style. If something impressed you, you could repeat it, but there's no need to copy it and quote it.

Bakhtiyar: I understand your point.

And I remember one meeting. You may have heard of the International Festival of Arts "Slavianski Bazaar" that I produced some time ago; it still exists.

Ilya: Yes, of course, I heard about it.

Bakhtiyar: Once, between concerts, while having dinner with academician Valentin Elizariyev, frankly speaking, a brilliant choreographer we talked about the meaning of creativity. Opening up, he said: Bakhtiyar, I see how you work, how you go forward, how you do interesting things. But you can't understand the main thing: for creativity's sake, you have to steal. Without this, nothing will happen.

At first, I did not understand the point he was making, but then I began to analyze his ballets and realized that he really appropriated many things from others. Moreover, once in Yugoslavia, in an interview with Sir David Bentley, the English choreographer of the Royal Theatre, I learned from that Elizariyev's famous ballet, *Carmina Burana* is absolutely identical to Bentley's own *Carmina Burana*.

Another choreographer I know went to St. Petersburg for a day, bought a cheap ticket to the nosebleed section of the Mariinsky Theatre, and filmed *La Bayadère* from there. The St. Petersburg version was based on solo parts and duets, in a word, on the chamber version. Returning to his theater, this choreographer and his team completely reproduced someone else's version recorded on video, but added a huge, luxurious ensemble to each scene. The result was a new "brilliant" production that awed everyone.

Ilya: Yes, everyone has their own secrets: someone goes to the left not to the right, not facing forward but facing backward; all artists have their own techniques. But you need to be inspired by all this. To develop your own creative style. I spend a lot of time studying resources. This does not mean that I watch non-stop performances only. These also include films, visual images and pictures.

Bakhtiyar: Do you sketch out your performances? I have always sketched out my films.

Ilya: If you mean the ensemble structure, then of course. Now I'm working with Cleveland Ballet dancers, there are twenty-three of them, but I do not position them as a corps de ballet. This is because when I first got to know the team, and Gladisa and Michael (Gladisa Guadalupe and Michael Krasnyansky - founders and leaders of Cleveland Ballet), I asked them who is your corps de ballet, who is the soloist, who is the lead dancer? "We don't

The long-awaited premiere of Cleveland Ballet, which will include George Balanchine's *Serenade* to music by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and the original *Symphony of Life* ballet to music by Israeli composer Anna Segal, staged by Ilya Zhivovy, one of the most celebrated young choreographers in the world, will take place at Playhouse Square's Connor Palace on April 21 and 22.

In the last issue of Prospect, we introduced you to the world-famous ballerina and choreographer Deborah Wingert, who worked with Cleveland Ballet on *Serenade* on behalf of The George Balanchine Trust.

Today, we introduce you to the choreographer Ilya Zhivovy.

have that," they said. "Here, all are equal." Thus, *Symphony of Life* will have soloists, duos and trios, but it will be a union of equals.

Bakhtiyar: We are all awaiting your new work, and really hope to see a production in your unique creative style. At the same time, your ballet will be bundled with Balanchine's creation, and the audience will involuntarily compare them. In your mind's eye, do you already see your show?

Ilya: Yes, I already came up with it; first of all, thanks to Anna Segal, a brilliant Israeli composer, who composed the score of *Symphony of Life*. While composing this music, she, too, was also inspired by a certain story.

Bakhtiyar: Which story?

Ilya: I don't know which. But it was not an abstract picture, it had its own specific task set by the composer for herself. I tried to get inside this music, to discover the threads it consists of, how these threads are intertwined, and what pattern they form. Having felt what she wanted to say, it was as if I saw the story she had made up.

Bakhtiyar: Is this a modern story or a look into the past?

Ilya: No, this is a situation, a situational series without reference to time.

Bakhtiyar: Your dancers are always timeless. This is what you love. As far as I know, your first production was not only avant-garde, but kind of scandalous. I mean the costumes, or rather virtually invisible costumes on dancers, where the main objective was only the human body. Do you still profess this idea?

Ilya: Yes, I do maintain the same approach. And this comes not only from me, but mainly from the costume designer, Sonya Vartanyan, my wife, with whom we work together. I really like it when the artist is wearing a costume but you can see their body. It's like seeing the soul through a mask.

We make a wonderful creative duo. I am happy that she is in my life, in my profession. She is indeed a very talented person, and her vision is priceless to me. She has worked in the fashion world for many years, and she has an excellent ability to visualize; she understands what is relevant now, what will be relevant in the future. It's so good when next to you is a person with such a vision of images, a vision of clothes.

Bakhtiyar: Apart from Sonya Vartanyan, lighting designer Konstantin Binkin is always on your team.

Ilya: Kostya is a lighting genius, and we continue to work together.

Bakhtiyar: In Cleveland, too?

Ilya: No, Kostya left for Tbilisi for a while, we stage *Carmina Burana* together at the



State Ballet of Georgia.

Bakhtiyar: At the heart of any of your ballets are three components: dance, costume and lighting. How will you meet this challenge here in Cleveland?

Ilya: I have absolutely no worries about the costumes; we have already reached a common denominator with Sonya.

Bakhtiyar: Will she be the costume designer for *Symphony of Life*?

Ilya: Yes. And the lighting designer will be a master from Cleveland Ballet. If need be, Kostya will help us with his good advice. He is a very talented person.

Bakhtiyar: Will you continue participating in international festivals or are you focusing only on productions in various theaters around the world?

Ilya: Well, why not? I recently participated in festivals in Denmark and Switzerland. We were received great. I don't like to boast, but it turned out really great.

Bakhtiyar: Do you have a producer or an impresario?

Ilya: No, I do everything myself. True, here in Cleveland, the famous ballerina and choreographer Valentina Kozlova became my producer of sorts. Owing to her, I met Gladisa and Michael. This will be my first production in the United States.

Bakhtiyar: What can you say about the cast of Cleveland Ballet?

Ilya: Yes, just a great troupe! In truth, I didn't expect it. They are smart, they understand me mid-sentence and, most importantly, they really want to work, they are very determined to work. And there are many of them. In terms of quantity, this is a large European company. There is plenty to work with, there is plenty to choose from.

Bakhtiyar: But your choreography is all plastic, all expression. Are the Cleveland Ballet dancers able to convey it?

Ilya: We are working on it, and they are responding well. I'm sure we will succeed!